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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force for the period from 17 May to 9 September 2017

I. Introduction

1. The present report gives an account of the activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) during the period 17 May to 9 September 2017, pursuant to the mandate contained in Security Council resolution 350 (1974) and extended in subsequent resolutions, most recently resolution 2361 (2017).

II. Situation in the area of operation and activities of the Force

2. During the reporting period, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic was maintained, albeit in a volatile environment attributable to the ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. That is notwithstanding a number of violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces (Disengagement of Forces Agreement) of 1974, which are set out below. The Syrian Arab Armed Forces and non-State armed opposition groups engaged in exchanges of heavy weapons fire in the area of separation and the area of limitation on the Bravo side. Different armed groups, including the listed terrorist group Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly the Nusrah Front)[1] and the Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid,[2] which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), continued to exchange fire in the UNDOF area of operation. Inside the area of separation, the presence of the Syrian armed forces and military equipment, as well as any other armed personnel and military equipment other than that of UNDOF, is in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. As underscored again by the Security Council in its resolution 2361 (2017), there should be no military activity of any kind in the area of separation.

3. In employing its best efforts to maintain the ceasefire and see that it is scrupulously observed, as prescribed in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement,

[1] In July 2016, the Nusrah Front announced that it had changed its name to Jabhat Fath al-Sham and declared that it had cut ties with Al-Qaida.

[2] The merger between the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and Harakat al Muthana was initially announced on 12 April 2016. On 24 May 2016, open sources reported that both groups were operating under the umbrella name of "Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid". On 20 July 2017, the group was listed by the Security Council, pursuant to annex III of resolution 2368 (2017), as being associated with ISIL or Al-Qaida.

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UNDOF reports all breaches of the ceasefire line that it observes. All incidents of firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line, as well as the crossing by individuals of the ceasefire line, are violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. In his regular interaction with both sides, the Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNDOF continued to call upon both parties to exercise restraint and prevent any miscalculations that might lead to an escalation of the situation. That was particularly the case when responding to incidents of spillover and retaliatory fire.

4. The situation in the area of separation, particularly during the month of June, was characterized by medium- to high-intensity fighting, mainly in the central parts of the area of separation. From 24 to 30 June, heavy exchanges of fire occurred between the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and armed groups in the area of separation, in Hamidiyah al-Jadidah, Ba'th and south Gharbiyah. According to open sources, the fighting occurred in the context of an unsuccessful offensive launched by armed groups, with the aim of capturing Ba'th. The intensity of the fighting decreased in the latter half of the reporting period. After 30 June, combat activity continued in central parts of the area of separation, but at a reduced level.

5. There were five incidents of spillover fire across the ceasefire line during the reporting period. On 24 June, UNDOF observed artillery rounds impacting west of the ceasefire line, approximately 2 kilometres north of UNDOF position 22. The artillery impacts encompassed three separate spillover incidents. It was not possible to send investigation teams at that time owing to the prevailing security situation. On 26 June, UNDOF observed an ammunition round impacting inside Camp Ziouani, prompting UNDOF personnel to move temporarily into bunkers. An investigation team from UNDOF concluded that the spillover fire was likely caused by a projectile of 12.7 mm to 30 mm calibre. The assessment of the investigation team was that the probable point of origin of the projectile was from the north-east across the ceasefire line. On 30 June, UNDOF observed one high explosive impact across the ceasefire line in close proximity to Camp Ziouani. UNDOF personnel had to also temporarily take shelter in bunkers following the incident. As with the spillover incidents of 24 June, it was not possible to launch an investigation of that particular incident owing to the intense combat activity in the area. The spillover fire incidents exposed UNDOF personnel to risk and were a serious threat to their safety and security.

6. According to open sources, the Israel Defense Forces responded to the spillover fire incidents, which occurred from 24 to 30 June, with retaliatory fire across the ceasefire line. UNDOF was unable to confirm any retaliatory fire or firing across the ceasefire line by the Israel Defense Forces. Syrian officials claimed that the Syrian Arab Armed Forces were not responsible for the firing of any artillery rounds or ammunitions across the ceasefire line and that they were concerned that the Israel Defense Forces were assisting armed groups with their ongoing offensive against the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. Syrian officials also claimed that armed groups were taking advantage of the technical fence while firing at Syrian Arab Armed Forces locations.

7. On 6 July, a small-arms firing incident was reported as impacting close to an Observer Group Golan/UNDOF patrol near a temporary observation post (post 127) in the Mount Hermon complex area. Four unidentified persons with weapons were observed by the patrol south-west of the temporary observation post. A rapid reaction group of the Nepalese contingent based in the Mount Hermon complex was dispatched to the area and the patrol was safely extracted to the Hermon Base position. On 19 July, a similar incident was reported, in which up to 900 rounds of small arms fire were fired during what appeared to be a clash between the armed groups and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. Two small-arms impacts were observed

close to the Observer Group Golan/UNDOF patrol positioned at temporary observation post 127 at that time. Similar to the incident of 6 July, the patrol was successfully extracted from the scene with the assistance of the Nepalese rapid reaction group and relocated to the Hermon Base position. UNDOF temporarily suspended patrolling to post 127 and utilized new temporary patrolling sites in order to mitigate the security risk to its personnel.

8. During the reporting period, there were 51 reports of aircraft detection and sighting in the area of separation and areas of limitation. UNDOF did not observe specific Israeli or Syrian air strikes in the area of separation and areas of limitation, but that does not indicate that such activity did not occur. On 24 June, UNDOF observed one fighter jet over the Bayt Jinn pocket and six high explosive impacts in the same general area. On 26 June, UNDOF heard a propeller engine aircraft, assessed as an unmanned aerial vehicle, circling at high altitude, in the vicinity of Qunaytirah. On 28 June, an aircraft suspected to be a fighter jet was observed in the vicinity of Camp Faouar. At that time, three heavy explosions were heard approximately 5 kilometres from the direction of the Camp. On 7 September, open sources reported that Israeli warplanes hit a military research facility outside the city of Hama, killing two Syrian Arab Armed Forces personnel. Open sources indicated that Israel declined to confirm responsibility for the missile strike but stated that it wanted to prevent the transfer of weapons that could be used to launch rocket attacks in the Israeli-occupied Golan.

9. The presence of berms or earthworks in the area of separation remained a concern for UNDOF throughout the reporting period. A berm over 2 kilometres long appears to be facilitating movement in the corridor between Hamidiyah al-Jadidah and Jubbata al-Khashab. The berm crosses the ceasefire line in at least one location and is used by armed groups. On 23 May, UNDOF observed armed personnel, possibly belonging to unidentified armed groups, conducting reconnaissance of areas in the vicinity of former occupied United Nations position 60A. On the same night, UNDOF observed a medium-sized bulldozer conducting earth works in the vicinity of the same position. Such activities continued until 8 June, and it is the assessment of UNDOF that a new berm has been constructed in the area. During the reporting period, UNDOF observed an increase in operational activities by armed groups in close proximity to the Israeli technical fence and the ceasefire line, utilizing the berms for tactical cover. From 24 to 30 June, UNDOF observed an M46 (a towed artillery gun), assessed as belonging to unidentified armed groups, positioned approximately 400 metres from observation post 51 and approximately 50 metres east of the ceasefire line, near former United Nations position 60A. UNDOF maintains its assessment that military operational activities by armed groups, including the practice of firing in close proximity to the ceasefire line and the technical fence, are a deliberate attempt to avoid retaliatory fire from the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. The activity has the potential to draw fire toward the ceasefire line, placing civilians and United Nations personnel on the Alpha side at increased risk.

10. UNDOF continued to observe, on a daily basis, the crossing of the ceasefire line by civilians, primarily shepherds, from the Bravo side to the Alpha side. Instances of interaction between Israel Defense Forces personnel and individuals from the Bravo side also continued to be observed in the vicinity of Mount Hermon and observation post 54. UNDOF cannot confirm or verify the nature of the interaction, which typically involves unidentified individuals from the Bravo side with unloaded mules being observed approaching the Israeli technical fence and returning to the Bravo side with mules carrying unidentified supplies. The Israel Defense Forces has maintained that such interactions are of a humanitarian and medical nature.

11. In the context of the ongoing Syrian conflict, clashes in the northern part of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side continued in the vicinity of Hadar and Tall al-Hamidiyah, also known as the "Castle", which remains contested. During the reporting period, fighting also continued in the Bayt Jinn pocket, consisting of the towns of Bayt Jinn, Mazra'at Bayt Jinn and Mughr al-Mir. The armed groups at the Castle were observed directing heavy machine gun fire towards the Syrian Arab Armed Forces in Hadar. Heavy explosive impacts were also seen and heard in the vicinity of Ufaniyah and Jubbata al-Khashab during the period. UNDOF noticed a spike in military combat activity towards the end of the reporting period, with more than 70 high explosive impacts and heavy machine gun fire heard north-east of Camp Faouar on 30 August. The assessment was that the combat activity was emanating from the Bayt Jinn region. On 8 September, armed groups in the Bayt Jinn pocket and at the Castle reportedly launched an offensive against pro-Government forces in Hadar, in an unsuccessful attempt to connect the two areas held by the armed groups. Relative to other periods within the present reporting cycle, United Nations personnel observed an increase in combat activity on 8 and 9 September. The increase in military operations in that area by armed groups is a matter of concern, particularly as UNDOF is planning the reoccupation of former United Nations positions, including observation post 71, in the context of its ongoing incremental return to Bravo side operations. UNDOF regularly observed armed individuals in the vicinity of observation post 71 throughout the reporting period.

12. The Mount Hermon complex remained relatively stable throughout the reporting period, with the exception of the firing incidents of 6 July and 19 July, described in paragraph 7, that directly affected the Observer Group Golan personnel. There has been an increase of transborder movements of unidentified individuals, likely due to more favourable weather conditions during the summer months, compared with the previous reporting period, and 42 crossings were observed. In a new pattern, the movements involved women and children.

13. The fighting between armed groups and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces in the central parts of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side has decreased since June and has generally remained at low levels. According to open sources, a suspected improvised explosive device attack carried out by a suicidal individual targeted a building in Khan Arnabah on 16/17 June. Open sources reported that the alleged attack resulted in the killing of a senior member of pro-government forces. UNDOF was not able to confirm the attack. Elsewhere, firing continued to be observed along the front lines in the vicinity of Syrian Arab Armed Forces positions towards positions held by armed groups in south Gharbiyah, Qunaytirah, Umm Batinah and the contested area of Samdaniyah.

14. In the southern part of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side, which remain for the most part under the control of non-State armed groups, including those listed by the Security Council as terrorist groups, fighting between Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid, on one side, and the Free Syrian Army and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, on the other side, has continued and, according to open sources, was concentrated around the contested area of Tasil. On 5 July, the fighting intensified, with high explosive impacts heard in the vicinity of observation post 54 and United Nations position 80. Open sources reported that the southern front factions of the Free Syrian Army launched an offensive targeting Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid-held areas in the south. However, the offensive did not result in a change in the front lines. On 28 and 29 August, the Free Syrian Army reportedly launched another offensive against the Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid, which resulted in the reporting of a large number of high explosions. On nine occasions, UNDOF observed mine harvesting by unidentified personnel in the area of separation close to the ceasefire

line, including a large volume of mines recovered in the southern part of the area of separation.

15. On 2 September, UNDOF received reports from Syrian officials purporting that the Israel Defense Forces had encroached into the area of separation in the vicinity of Burayqah and were conducting activity in the area. UNDOF consulted with Israeli officials who confirmed that the Israel Defense Forces did have forces operating in four armoured personnel carriers in an area east of the Israeli technical fence but west of the ceasefire line in the vicinity of Burayqah. Acting upon available information, UNDOF was unable to confirm that a violation had occurred. Both sides were advised of the outcome of the UNDOF inquiry.

16. The military violations on the Alpha side included 95 reports of M109 self-propelled guns, Iron Dome systems, missile carriers, light armoured vehicles and armoured patrol vehicles within the 10-kilometre zone, which are considered unauthorized personnel and military equipment in the areas of limitation. There were three incidents of firing into the area of separation and more than 87 restrictions of movement of UNDOF by the Israel Defense Forces recorded during the reporting period. On 24 July, observation post 53 observed one Israel Defense Forces soldier firing five shots to the east and in the general direction of a shepherd who was west of the ceasefire line. On 17 August, observation post 51 observed Israel Defense Forces personnel firing single shots into the area of separation and in the direction of shepherds who were in the area of separation but east of the Alpha line. On 31 August, observation post 51 observed an Israel Defense Forces soldier firing his rifle into the area of separation in the direction of a shepherd who had crossed the Alpha line. On the Bravo side, violations involved shepherds and other civilians crossing the Alpha line, which continue to occur frequently. The violations were protested to the parties. UNDOF also protested all violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement that it observed to both parties, including the presence of unauthorized equipment in the area of separation and firing into the area of separation.

17. Of particular concern is the frequency and number of restrictions of UNDOF movements imposed by the Israel Defense Forces, which have increased considerably relative to the previous reporting period. Restriction of movement has a negative impact on the ability of UNDOF to conduct its mandated tasks. Engagement between UNDOF and the Israel Defense Forces continues to endeavour to reduce delays and challenges experienced by United Nations personnel in crossing through the technical fence to United Nations observation posts and positions. During the reporting period, the Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNDOF continued to remind the parties of their obligation to scrupulously abide by the terms of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, to ensure the safety and security of United Nations personnel on the ground and to extend all cooperation to UNDOF in the fulfilment of the tasks that it is obligated to fulfil under its mandate.

18. During the reporting period, UNDOF observed several locations where 472 tents and other structures appeared to have been set up for internally displaced persons in the area of separation and in its proximity. The number of people in the camps could not be ascertained and appeared to fluctuate. However, the population in the camps appeared to increase when the villages in the vicinity of the camps were subjected to heavy bombardment. Owing to the closure of the established crossing point at Qunaytirah between the Alpha and Bravo sides since late August 2014, UNDOF remains unable to facilitate, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, humanitarian crossings, including for students, between the two sides.

19. Since its temporary relocation from a number of positions in September 2014, and pending its full return to the area of separation, UNDOF has continued to maintain visibility, albeit limited, of the area of separation and the ceasefire line from its positions on Mount Hermon, Camp Faouar, position 80 in the southern part of the area of separation and position 22 on the Alpha side. UNDOF operations continued to be supported by United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) military observers in Observer Group Golan, who are under the operational control of UNDOF and have maintained five fixed and four temporary observation posts along the Alpha line. The focus of the activities of Observer Group Golan was on continuous static observation and situational awareness. Observer Group Golan-Damascus also continued operations on Mount Hermon, following their resumption of activities on 8 May, as indicated in my previous report (S/2017/486).

20. Through Observer Group Golan, UNDOF continued to carry out fortnightly inspections of equipment and force levels in the area of limitation on the Alpha side. Liaison officers from the Alpha side accompanied the inspection teams. Inspections in the area of limitation on the Bravo side remained suspended owing to the security situation.

21. UNDOF, in consultation with both parties, continued to review the situation in the area of separation to assess whether the conditions on the ground permitted the continuation of the incremental return to vacated positions in the area of separation. In that regard, UNDOF leadership conducted several reconnaissance missions to former United Nations positions and observation posts on the Bravo side, including to Camp Faouar, observation posts 52, 56, 71 and 72 and positions 10, 16 and 25. The UNDOF Force Commander also continued his frequent visits and inspections of Camp Faouar and Mount Hermon on the Bravo side.

22. During the reporting period, UNDOF continued to make progress towards the limited return to Bravo side operations in line with the phased UNDOF plan. Phase 1 of the plan has continued to progress satisfactorily since 14 November 2016, when UNDOF re-established an initial presence at Camp Faouar, and conditions have steadily improved in line with the mission support plan. The building of key infrastructure and accommodation has continued. From an operational perspective, the security and defence of the Camp have been continuously practised and all deployed elements have been integrated into a cohesive and effective component with clear command and control. The seven armoured personnel carriers that deployed to UNDOF in March 2017 (see S/2017/486, para. 26) form an integral part of the enhanced force protection and mobility required for current UNDOF operations, particularly in position 80 in the southern part of the area of operation. The deployment of the mechanized infantry company from Nepal, which was initially planned for July, began on 5 September with the arrival of an advance party and is expected to be complete before the end of September 2017. That will signal the activation of phase 2 of the plan, which will involve the resumption, conditions permitting, of limited patrols in the northern part of the area of separation. That deployment will further enhance force protection and improve situational awareness and observation measures.

23. In accordance with the provisions of Security Council resolution 2361 (2017), efforts continued to deploy appropriate technology to ensure the safety and security of UNDOF personnel and equipment. Heavier reliance on modern technology is required in view of the prevailing and fluid security situation on the Bravo side. In that regard, UNDOF has initiated the procurement of technology, such as surveillance trailers, to enhance force protection and increase situational awareness. Surveillance trailers have been deployed on the Alpha side to Camp Ziouani and to observation post 22 and are fully operational. A training programme has been initiated on the use of the equipment by UNDOF personnel. Additional surveillance trailers are expected to be deployed in other United Nations posts along the Alpha

side, following an internal after-action review of the initial deployment by UNDOF. A surveillance trailer has also been deployed in Camp Faouar on the Bravo side and will be operational soon. In addition, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations of the Secretariat shared in July 2017 the technical specifications of a "sense and warn" system with the Government of Israel and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, and looks forward to further engagement with the parties on the matter. The Security Council will be updated as necessary on progress made and challenges encountered in that respect.

24. Since the commencement of phase 1 in November 2016, no adverse reaction to the return of UNDOF to Camp Faouar has been perceived. No deliberate actions have been taken by any armed groups to threaten the presence of UNDOF on the Bravo side. At the same time, continued military activities in the area of separation and area of limitation still pose risk to UNDOF. The mission will continue to monitor the situation so as to ensure effective force protection and the safety and security of UNDOF personnel.

25. Conditions permitting, phase 2 will include, over a period of six to eight months, an initial phase of limited patrolling by the mechanized infantry company from Camp Faouar into the northern part of the area of operation. The movement of the UNDOF and Observer Group Golan headquarters from Damascus to Camp Faouar, as well as the movement of the Force Reserve Company from Camp Ziouani to Camp Faouar, are envisaged in phase 3. That phase will also involve the refurbishment of physical infrastructure and security preparations for the reoccupation of select observation posts in the area of separation. The plans also include consideration of the requirements for the reoccupation of observation post 52, including in terms of situational awareness and security aspects. Observer Group Golan military observers would not be deployed at observation posts on a permanent basis until security conditions allow and adequate accommodation is in place.

26. UNDOF continued to resupply its positions on Mount Hermon and Camp Faouar from Damascus. UNDOF convoys between Damascus and United Nations positions were conducted almost daily, with a security escort from UNDOF accompanied by a liaison officer from the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. On 6 September, open sources reported that two unidentified persons were killed by an improvised explosive device on the road to Mashara town, close to main supply route 7. UNDOF continuously monitors the situation and takes necessary precautionary measures in planning and conducting its convoys along that route. UNDOF continued to conduct and update its contingency planning for the reinforcement and evacuation of United Nations positions and observation posts and for the relocation and evacuation of United Nations personnel on both the Alpha and Bravo sides, as well as in Damascus. The implementation of risk mitigation, including force protection measures recommended in the military capability study of UNDOF, continued at observation posts, positions and the operational base at Camp Ziouani.

27. UNDOF closely followed the developments related to the de-escalation zone in the south-west part of the Syrian Arab Republic, which was established in accordance with an agreement reached on 9 July between Jordan, the Russian Federation and the United States of America. Given the potential overlap between the de-escalation zone and the UNDOF area of operation, the UNDOF Head of Mission and Force Commander maintained contact with relevant interlocutors to seek clarity with regard to arrangements envisaged under the agreement and their potential implications for UNDOF. During such contacts with Syrian and Russian officials in the Syrian Arab Republic, UNDOF understood that the deployment of Russian military police had taken place in proximity to Bayt Jinn and south of Jaba in the area of limitation on the Bravo side. Liaison is being pursued, with the aim of facilitating the Force's freedom of movement and the discharge of its mandate.

including as it relates to reporting on military activity in the area, as well as to the safety and security of United Nations personnel.

28. As at 9 September, UNDOF comprised 829 troops, including 30 women. Troops are currently deployed from Bhutan (3), Czechia (2), Fiji (300), Finland (2), India (204), Ireland (136), Nepal (180) and the Netherlands (2). In addition, 77 military observers from UNTSO/Observer Group Golan, including 8 women, assisted the Force in carrying out its tasks.

III. Implementation of Security Council resolution 338 (1973)

29. In its resolution 2361 (2017), the Security Council called upon the parties concerned to immediately implement its resolution 338 (1973), decided to renew the mandate of UNDOF for a further period of six months, until 31 December 2017, and requested the Secretary-General to report every 90 days on developments in the situation and the measures taken to implement resolution 338 (1973). The search for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East, in particular the efforts made at various levels to implement resolution 338 (1973), is addressed in my report on the situation in the Middle East (A/72/333), submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 71/24 on the Syrian Golan and 71/25 on Jerusalem.

30. Since the discontinuation of indirect peace talks in December 2008, there have been no negotiations between the parties. The Syrian conflict is further reducing the prospects for their resumption and for progress towards peace between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. I look forward to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the resumption of efforts towards a comprehensive, just and durable peace settlement, as called for by the Security Council in its resolution 338 (1973) and other relevant resolutions.

IV. Observations

31. I note with grave concern the recent escalation of military activity across the ceasefire line, and in particular the incidents of spillover and retaliatory fire that occurred between 24 and 30 June, which posed significant risks to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, as well as to the safety and security of UNDOF personnel. All military engagements between the parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement are serious cause for concern and have the potential to escalate tensions and jeopardize the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. I encourage the members of the Security Council to support efforts to sensitize both parties and regional stakeholders to the risks of such escalation, and the need to preserve the long-standing ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic.

32. As previously reported by UNDOF, the Israel Defense Forces hold the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic responsible for any spillover fire incidents to the Alpha side, regardless of the point of origin of the fire. It remains critical that the parties maintain their liaison with UNDOF in the first instance to prevent any escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line. It is not acceptable for UNDOF to be reliant on open sources to determine the extent of a deliberate violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. All violations of the ceasefire line, such as those that occurred during the period from 24 to 30 June, increase tensions between the signatories of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. For its part, the United Nations will maintain its efforts to ensure that the long-standing ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic continues to hold.

33. I remain gravely concerned by the prevailing security situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, its impact on the Syrian population and its implications for the

stability of the wider region. The continued fighting on the Bravo side between the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and armed groups, and between different armed groups, including listed terrorist groups, such as Jabhat Fath al-Sham, and ISIL affiliates, such as Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid, in the southern part of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side, as well as the possibility of retaliatory fire by the Israel Defence Forces across the ceasefire line, jeopardize the long-term ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic and continue to significantly affect the UNDOF area of operation. The construction of earth berms by armed groups close to the Israeli technical fence and the increasing trend of operational activity conducted by armed groups in close proximity to the technical fence and ceasefire line is a cause of concern to UNDOF owing to the serious risk of escalation between the two parties such activity entails.

34. The presence of the Syrian armed forces and unauthorized military equipment in the area of separation are violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. The continued use of heavy weapons by the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and armed groups in the ongoing Syrian conflict is disturbing and continues to significantly impede the successful implementation of the UNDOF mandate. I note that, while there is a reduction in the levels of firing in the northern part of the UNDOF area of operation, listed terrorist groups and other armed groups continue to maintain control over significant sections of the areas of separation and limitation in the UNDOF area of operation on the Bravo side. The established crossing between the Alpha and Bravo sides remains closed.

35. There should be no military forces in the area of separation other than those of UNDOF. I call upon all parties to the Syrian conflict to cease military actions throughout the country, including in the UNDOF area of operation, and to remove all military equipment and all armed personnel from the area of separation.

36. The Israel Defense Forces should refrain from firing across the ceasefire line. The firing across the ceasefire line by the Israel Defense Forces has the potential to escalate tensions between the two sides. The continued presence of unauthorized weapons and equipment in the area of limitation on the Alpha side is also of concern.

37. Interaction and perceived interaction between the Israel Defense Forces and unidentified individuals from the Bravo side, including in the area of Mount Hermon, has the potential to lead to clashes between armed elements and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. I reiterate my call to both parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement regarding the requirement to maintain stability in the area. All military activities in the area of separation conducted by any actor pose a risk to the ceasefire and to the local civilian population, in addition to the United Nations personnel on the ground. I call upon all parties to take all measures necessary to protect civilians.

38. As UNDOF consolidates its presence at Camp Faouar and continues its efforts to intensify its operations in the area of separation, it remains critical that the safety and security of United Nations personnel be assured. The circumstances under which the troops and military observers are operating remain complex and challenging, and require continued vigilance and risk mitigation measures. I renew my call on the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to fulfil its primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. I also renew my call on countries with influence to strongly and urgently convey to the armed groups in the UNDOF area of operation the imperative to cease any action in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, bearing in mind that such actions also jeopardize the safety and security of United Nations personnel, and to respect the freedom of United Nations personnel to carry out their clear and important mandate safely and securely. The safety and security of United Nations personnel must be ensured.

39. Both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the presence of UNDOF in calling for a return to vacated positions in the area of separation. The full return of UNDOF to the area of separation remains a priority for the mission. In the next phase (phase 2) of the limited return to Bravo side operations, conditions permitting, the ongoing deployment of a Nepalese mechanized infantry company, due to be complete by the end of September 2017, will enable UNDOF to commence limited patrolling from Camp Faouar into the northern part of the area of separation. I count on the continued cooperation of both parties with UNDOF in order for the mission to advance its planning for the incremental return to operations and positions in the area of separation. As a matter of priority, the technology and equipment necessary to enhance the UNDOF observation of the area of separation and the ceasefire line, and to improve force protection, remain critical. In that regard, the support and cooperation of both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic in ensuring that the deployment of the necessary technology equipment happens seamlessly and expeditiously is essential. At the same time, the parties must continue to support the enhancement of the liaison function of UNDOF.

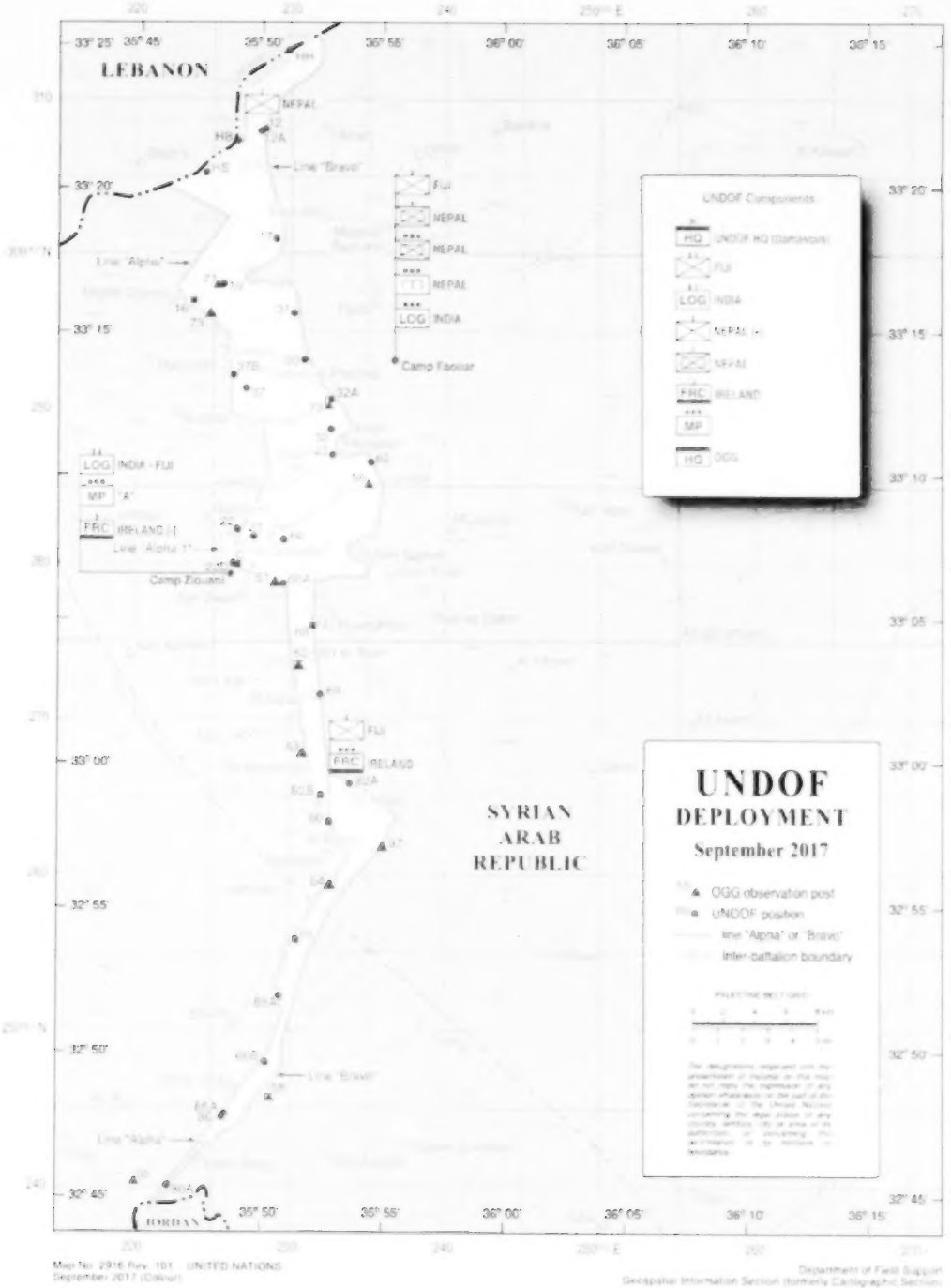
40. I encourage the continued dialogue between the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the UNDOF Head of Mission and Force Commander with the relevant Member States on the de-escalation zone in the south-west part of the Syrian Arab Republic, with the primary aim of maintaining confidence in and continued support for the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and the safety and security of UNDOF activities and operations in support of the Agreement.

41. It is equally important that the Security Council continue to bring to bear its influence on the parties concerned to ensure that UNDOF is accorded the ability to operate in a safe and secure manner, and is allowed to operate freely, in accordance with the protocols to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. As long as the area of separation remains militarized and the presence of armed groups and/or the Syrian Arab Armed Forces continues, UNDOF will only fulfil its mandate in a limited manner. It is essential that this issue be addressed by the parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and in the wider framework of the Syrian political process. Furthermore, the reopening of the regular crossing point established at Qunaytirah would benefit the ability of UNDOF to implement its mandate. It is also necessary for UNDOF to continue to have at its disposal all means and resources necessary for it to return fully to the area of separation, conditions permitting.

42. The confidence and commitment of troop-contributing countries in UNDOF remains a key factor in the mission's ability to carry out its mandate. I continue to count on the support of troop-contributing countries as UNDOF proceeds along the agreed strategy with its planning, including in relation to the augmentation of required capabilities, in preparation for the envisaged increased operations in the area of separation. I am grateful to the Governments of Bhutan, Czechia, Fiji, Finland, India, Ireland, Nepal and the Netherlands for their contributions, their commitment, their resolve and their consummate professionalism. I am also thankful to the Member States contributing military observers to UNTSO.

43. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the Head of Mission and Force Commander, Major General Jai Shanker Menon, and the military and civilian personnel serving under his leadership, who continue to perform the important tasks assigned to them by the Security Council with efficiency and commitment under challenging circumstances.

Annex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